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ABSTRACT

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has acted to provide a new perspective with its 1985 survey of the literacy skills of young Americans aged 21-25. In the spring of 1985, NAEP began screening 40,000 households to identify a nationally representative sample of between 3,600 and 5,000 young adults aged 21-25 and several hundred out-of-school 17-year-olds. (An oversampling of Black and Hispanic young adults will permit NAEP to deliver reliable reports on those groups.) We can fully appreciate the conditions of literacy among young adults in our society only when we survey their proficiency at various tasks along with the characteristics of the backgrounds and the environments in which they live. NAEP staff members will gather information on the background and demographic characteristics of young adults. A second phase of the study involves the measurement of "core" skills, and a third phase includes simulation tasks to draw a profile of literacy skills or an oral language interview. Findings of the study will have implications for economic development, educational programs, and practical programs to improve literacy. (LMO)

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PROFILES OF LITERACY

An Assessment of Young Adults

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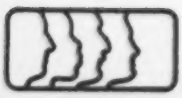

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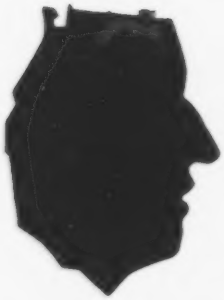
PROFILES OF LITERACY



A street-wise young adult who functions successfully on the job each day might be designated "illiterate" by some criteria, "functionally illiterate" by others, and "literate" by still others merely by virtue of a sixth-grade education, a cut score on a particular test, or an eighth-grade reading level.

With estimates of illiteracy ranging from 1 to 50 percent of the population, it is not surprising that inconsistent judgments are commonplace. Such labels are, however, singularly unhelpful. An educator who hopes to understand the strengths and weaknesses of young adults must have clear and meaningful information about their levels of literacy.

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The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has acted to provide this new perspective with its 1985 survey of the literacy skills of young Americans aged 21-25. Respondents' performance on the broad range of tasks included in this assessment will provide a rich source of information for those concerned with the needs of this target population.

NAEP has been assessing the skills and knowledge of the nation's youth for almost two decades. It has turned its attention to the country's 20 million young adults because they constitute a quarter of the nation's work force and the highest proportion of its unemployed. At the same time, they are at that point in life where they must secure a place in the employment world. This places a major obstacle before those who are ill-prepared for a technologically advanced society.

Reading and writing skills enable people to accomplish many tasks, whether the tasks are associated with job performance, household management, or community involvement. These skills are also basic to self-directed lifelong learning, which is particularly important in a technologically dynamic society in which new forms of written documents are emerging and new strategies for coping with them are expected.

Historians note that our definitions of and standards for literacy have changed as society has become more complex. Early in our history, literacy was defined according to the ability to sign one's name. It was not until much later that students were expected to read aloud fluently — and not until this century that primary emphasis was placed upon reading to gain information.

Recognizing the many reading and writing skills needed in our rapidly changing culture, a panel of experts, convened last year by the National Assessment, defined literacy as "using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential."

This definition recognizes that any meaningful portrait of literacy must reflect the many nuances of society itself.

Despite the dramatic increases in spending for education in recent years, educators, employers, and citizens are increasingly concerned that too many students leave high school ill-equipped to find, hold, and progress in a job or to assume their responsibilities

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as citizens in a democracy. Many believe that large numbers of students graduate from high school deficient in basic skills. Compounding this problem are the estimated 800,000 students who drop out of school each year.

Debate over these apparent deficiencies is taking place at a time when the nature of work is changing. The continued shift in our society from manufacturing to information/service — combined with increasing foreign competition and accelerating technological change — has made literacy skills crucial for increasing numbers of workers. Moreover, demographic shifts are expected to produce significant changes in both the *number* and *makeup* of the groups that will enter the job market over the next 20 years.

An Assessment of Young Adults

It is within this economic and social context that the National Assessment will investigate the nature and extent of literacy among America's young adults. In the spring of 1985, NAEP began screening 40,000 households to identify a nationally representative sample of between 3,600 and 5,000 young adults aged 21-25 and several hundred out-of-school 17-year-olds. (An oversampling of Black and Hispanic young adults will permit NAEP to deliver reliable reports on those groups.)

The model for the adult literacy assessment is grounded in the belief that what constitutes literacy is inseparable from the social settings in which literate behavior occurs. Thus, literacy is *not*

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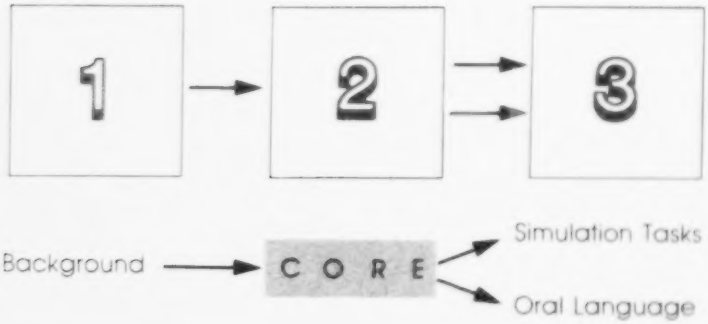
primarily a set of independent skills associated with reading and writing but the application of particular skills for specific purposes in specific contexts. **We can fully appreciate the condition of literacy among young adults in our society only when we survey their proficiency at various tasks along with the characteristics of the backgrounds and the environments in which they live.**

Consequently, in the first phase of NAEP's assessment, staff members will gather information on the background and demographic characteristics of young adults, including the environments in which they grew up, their early language experiences, education and training, job status and aspirations, current reading and writing practices, and community involvement.



The second phase involves the measurement of "core" skills. Such measurement will enable NAEP to map the changing definitions of literacy in this country according to tasks that include: signing one's name, reading a short passage aloud, comprehending literal information, and performing practical tasks such as reading street signs and medicine labels.

In the third phase of the study, NAEP staff members will use simulation tasks to draw a profile of literacy skills or an oral language interview to assess a respondent's proficiency in spoken English. Individuals who are able to complete the core with little difficulty will move directly to the simulation tasks, which constitute the major thrust of the assessment.

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"If we're to renew our economy, protect our freedom, we must sharpen the skills of every American mind and enlarge the potential of every individual American life. Unfortunately, the hidden problem of adult illiteracy holds back too many of our citizens, and as a nation, we, too, pay a price."

Ronald Reagan, President of the United States

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In addition to answering some multiple-choice questions from NAEP's 1983-84 assessment of reading and writing, respondents will perform reading, writing, speaking, and listening tasks that simulate behavior across a range of situations. These tasks are designed to assess respondents' skills in recognizing, acquiring, organizing, interpreting, and applying information that involves the use of various types of printed material.

Using a four-page newspaper that contains articles reproduced just as they appeared in national newspapers, respondents will summarize arguments from an editorial, locate specific information in a news story, explain orally what they have read, and look up information in a television listing as well as on the classified page.

The respondents will also use the index of a world almanac to locate and extract various kinds of information. Other simulation tasks include:

- looking at a credit card bill and writing a letter explaining that an error in billing has been made
- writing a short interpretation of a poem
- filling out a job application
- making entries in a checkbook
- selecting information from a catalog to complete an order form
- using airline information to select flights for people who must travel from different cities to attend a conference
- reading and interpreting unfamiliar prose.

The core items will also help NAEP identify nonreaders. Respondents who encounter considerable difficulty in completing the core tasks and who, therefore, would probably be frustrated by the array of simulation tasks, will be asked instead to respond to an oral interview. This interview will determine how effectively they use spoken English and will also obtain information about respondents' familiarity with, and understanding of, various literacy materials. The oral interview will also be administered to a control group of individuals who perform the simulation tasks.

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Using the Results

NAEP's assessment of young adults seeks to provide insights into the literacy problems that face our nation and its young adults. It has targeted questions such as:

- What are the various levels and types of literacy achieved by different groups?
- What are the patterns of performance associated with various social, educational, and occupational variables?
- What is the relationship between literacy performance and time spent reading and writing at home and on the job?
- How effectively does a selected group of young adults use spoken English?
- What is the relationship between the literacy performance of young adults and the reading performance of 17-year-old students?

Answers to these questions have important implications for the development and evaluation of "second chance" education and training programs.

Moreover, NAEP's young adult literacy assessment will be one of the first truly in-depth studies to relate the ability of people to

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apply printed information to the circumstances of their lives.

But its potential value only begins there.

The findings, due in the spring of 1986, will have implications for economic development, educational planning, and practical programs to improve literacy, whether those efforts are initiated by state legislators, nonprofit groups, researchers, or educational policymakers.

The Nation's Progress Report

The National Assessment of Educational Progress is the only project of its kind in the nation that reports regularly on the educational realities — the good news as well as the bad — to parents, principals, and policymakers throughout the nation. NAEP provides a measure of how much the nation's public and independent school students and young adults are learning and have learned.

For almost two decades, NAEP has served as the nation's report card, regularly collecting and reporting information about the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of 9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds in writing, reading, mathematics, science, literature, art, music, social studies, computer competence, citizenship, and career and occupational development. The NAEP data base is comprised of well over a million students.

The National Assessment, a congressionally mandated project, is funded by the National Institute of Education and is administered by Educational Testing Service (ETS) as an activity of its Center for the Assessment of Educational Progress.

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For More Information

If you would like to be kept informed of the progress and results of "Profiles of Literacy," or if you would like to know how a similar study can be tailored for your state, community, or organization, please call (800) 223-0267 or write:

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